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THE POLITICAL SCENE IN GREAT BRITAIN

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PARLIAMENTARY politics in Great Britain are in the transition stage between the national unity of the war and the normal party divisions of the new era. Not for many a long day has the future been so uncertain, the study of political probabilities more baffling or more interesting. Not only have the old party divisions been obliterated by the war, but the personalities on whom the electorate used to rely for leadership have lost most of their old magic of persuasion. As we survey the ranks of our political leaders we see great gaps, and even greater changes in the relative prestige of one man over another. In July, 1914, there were three or four men in British public life who were the equals—even the superiors—of Mr. Lloyd George. The country had then infinitely greater confidence in Mr. Asquith, Mr. Balfour, and Sir Edward Grey; while Mr. Lloyd George was regarded with some trepidation even by his friends. Today the scene is changed—not perhaps in the sense that Mr. Lloyd George inspires any less trepidation among those who disapprove of his methods—but because the great mass of the people has responded to the magnetism of his leadership during the last five years, and so he has become a national leader where before the war he was only a daring party chief. It is the purpose of this article to give, in the form of a foot-note to contemporary political history, some account of the changes now going on within the body of British politics.

When the end of the war came in sight in the early autumn of 1918 it was clear that a general election could not long be postponed. The House of Commons then in being was elected in December, 1910, with a legal lease of life of five years. It should have come to an end on or before Nov.

30, 1915; but the circumstances of the war were such as absolutely to forbid the outbreak of political strife; and thus Parliament, with the active approval of the country, prolonged its own life by temporary enactments from year to year. The third of these prolongations was near its end in September, 1918, and speculation was rife whether the Government would hold an election at an early date or would prolong the life of Parliament once more. The argument in favor of the latter course seemed to be overwhelming. The great majority of commonsense people did not wish to interfere with Mr. Lloyd George's tenure of power, or even to pass judgment upon it in any way, until after the definite signature of peace. Moreover, they foresaw that there could be no genuine political consultation of the people until the conditions of war had to some extent passed away, until peace was signed, until the army was demobilized, and, most of all, until the electorate as a whole had taken stock of its new political and economic situation in the exceptional circumstances created by the war. This argument naturally led to the conclusion that, on the assumption that the war would end before Christmas, 1918, there would be no election until about a year later. The case thus presented seemed to be unanswerable. But Mr. Lloyd George found an answer. He declared that the supreme thing was to give the British representatives going to Paris to make peace a fresh and unequivocal mandate from the British people. On the merits of the question this was not a good answer. Mr. Lloyd George himself was the head of the Delegation; and he required no electoral proof of his power or prestige which was never higher, popularly speaking, than in November, 1918. Brushing aside the excuse given by Mr. Lloyd George for making his election, we can see that the real motive was to give him a renewed lease of political life.

The election itself, as readers of the NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW will remember, degenerated into an orgy of chauvinism. It had no real political character whatever; and as it proceeded it showed the worst side of Mr. Lloyd George's character. I believe that he himself embarked on the election with the intention of carrying out a not altogether extravagant programme; but yielding to the clamour of the moment he switched the election on to the Kaiser and German indemnities. "Hanging the Kaiser," and "making Germany pay" were the only cries to be heard throughout

the length and breadth of the country. The attempt made by some of the Independent Liberal leaders and by the Labor party to raise the problem of the economic future of the country utterly failed. The country was in no mood to think, or talk, sense. It was celebrating victory; and the overwhelming majority which the Government won can be interpreted as nothing more than a national vote of thanks to Mr. Lloyd George for winning the war.

Even before the election was held the political situation was rather more complicated than is usually the case on the eve of an electoral struggle. The Conservative party was the only united powerful political organization, but it had no leaders. Its one supreme personality, Mr. Arthur Balfour, was about to become a mere spectator, and its actual leader, Mr. Bonar Law, though he had won considerable prestige and popularity by the handling of the House of Commons during the war, never was and is not now a national leader. The Liberal party possessed at least two leaders, but was split in half by a controversy, at once personal and political, between them. When Mr. Asquith's Cabinet fell in 1916, a chasm was dug between those who were afterwards called Coalition Liberals and Independent Liberals. The Independent Liberals following Mr. Asquith declared that their leader's fall had been brought about by the treachery of Mr. Lloyd George. There is some truth in the charge, though "treachery" is an ugly and excessive word to use in this connection. Neither Mr. Lloyd George, nor Lord Northcliffe, nor the Conservative party, nor all three put together, would have been powerful enough in 1916 to destroy the Coalition Government if Mr. Asquith himself had not contrived to give the country the impression that he lacked not only vigour but—what was much more vital—the conviction that he could win. No doubt the methods used by Lord Northcliffe and others, not excluding Mr. Lloyd George himself, were not easy to justify or condone. But if I join in the censure passed by Liberals upon the Lloyd George-Northcliffe intrigue I cannot assign to it the first place among the events which brought about the change of government in 1916. The country wanted a stronger government, and one with greater vigour. Mr. Lloyd George provided it; and when victory was won under his auspices two years later he stood at the zenith of

his popular fame, while Mr. Asquith fell—not into oblivion, but into an abyss of unpopularity.

The plan which Mr. Lloyd George entertained on the eve of the election was as follows: The new House of Commons would be composed roughly speaking of three sections—

1. The Conservative Party (the right wing of the Coalition).

2. The Coalition Liberals personally attached to himself.

3. An opposition composed of Mr. Asquith's followers and of the Labor Party.

Neither then, nor for a while after the election, did Mr. Lloyd George pay any attention to Ireland; and that is one of his most serious and unpardonable blunders. The Irish vote—both in Ireland itself and in the House of Commons—was not included in his calculations. He assumed that his Coalition Government would continue in power supported by a political alliance of Coalition Conservatives and Coalition Liberals. He also assumed that the time would come, soon or late, when his conservative partners in the coalition would be unable to swallow the radicalism of his programme. And it is clear that he intended at that time to carry out a political programme of progressively liberal character, choosing some dramatic moment of conflict with the Conservatives, throwing them over, taking the Asquithians and the Labor party into his Government, and thrusting the whole Conservative party into opposition. This plan could only work if the three sections mentioned above were approximately equal in size. The caprice of the electorate, and the skill of the Conservative party managers completely upset Mr. Lloyd George's plan, with the result that the new Parliament contained, in round numbers, 380 *Conservatives*, 150 *Coalition Liberals*, 60 *Labor men* and 30 *Independent Liberals*. The total membership of the House of Commons is 707, the outstanding 80 seats being held by the Irish Sinn Fein party who refused to attend at Westminster. Though this result was a personal triumph for Mr. Lloyd George, it was only momentary. The results were declared on December 28, 1918; and before the middle of January Mr. Lloyd George's second thoughts showed the depth of his chagrin. In a speech delivered in North Wales, early in January, he threatened his predom-

inant Conservative partners in the Coalition with another early general election if they refused to take the line of progress which he proposed to lay for them. In making this threat Mr. Lloyd George did not seem to recognize his own weakness. Not only had the result of the general election upset his project, but he was in no position to issue marching orders to the Conservatives for the very good reason that he did not know where he was going himself. That is to say, he knew in general terms that he wanted a good peace; that houses must be built in England; and that someone must take the profiteers by the throat; but neither that nor the war cries of the election sufficed to make a policy. Indeed, no government ever entered office with such overwhelming public support and with such complete poverty of programme. The character of the Ministry gives us the clue to this poverty. It was a coalition, and therefore could never achieve anything more than a negative unity. Ministers were united in resisting their critics; they were united in denouncing the Bolsheviks; they were for a short time united in believing that they could make Germany pay; but when they came to discuss any positive project of political action or legislation, they found themselves divided by a fundamental cleavage of political opinion.

In such circumstances their chief security lay in the weakness of the Opposition. Indeed, in the ordinary parliamentary sense of the word there was no Opposition; and before long it became evident that the most urgent political need of the moment was the restoration of parliamentary equilibrium by a more approximately equal distribution of power between the Government and the Opposition. Both in numbers and in quality the Liberal and Labor parties in Parliament were too poor to drive home any effective criticism against the Government; and therefore the Government and the Coalition majority developed a dangerous lack of discipline which led them into a whole series of errors. It cannot be said that the ranks of the Coalition parties themselves were particularly rich in talent. One of the most remarkable and unhappy features of the general election was the preference shown by the electorate for very mediocre candidates. A less distinguished House of Commons never assembled at Westminster after an election. The election was held at a moment when public opinion was in a state of

high emotion—and therefore of instability; and while it is certainly true that the House of Commons represented accurately the state of the public mind on Armistice night, it is also true that within six weeks the House had lost its representative character, and that the country had repented of its extravagant action in the previous November. In a series of remarkable by-elections held in different parts of the country, and therefore reasonably representative of the average national opinion, the electorate reversed in 1919 the judgment given at the end of 1918. The former year was thus a period in which coalition stock fell heavily in popular esteem. The Opposition parties, and especially the Labor party, were presented with a great opportunity which they completely failed to exploit. The failure of the Labor party has such significance for the immediate future of British politics that we may turn aside for a moment to examine the causes which gave rise to somewhat extravagant labor hopes and those other causes which have defeated them.

The war lasted so long that the vast mass of British opinion became wholly detached from its pre-war associations. Party allegiance lost its hold; and millions of men and women looked at the problems and personalities of the war and of post-war politics with entirely new eyes. Party controversy was banished from the political scene, though to be sure party spirit occasionally raised its head in the House of Commons; and the whole machinery of party politics was diverted from its normal use to the propagation of Allied doctrine, the propaganda of economy of food control, and the war loans. The outstanding party chiefs on both sides were wholly immersed in the huge preoccupations of the war, and naturally gave no thought to domestic problems except in so far as they were raised by such questions as the national use of man power and the production of munitions. Meanwhile there grew up in the public mind, whence no one quite knew, a general feeling that the Allies were fighting not only to end war, but to recreate Europe, and to establish happier democratic conditions in Great Britain. There is no doubt that, apart from the grim resolve to win the war, this feeling was the most active motive in the public mind. As President Wilson truly said, there were voices in the air—voices proclaiming that the end of the war would be the threshold of a new earth. Lead-

ing politicians of both the older parties failed to catch these voices or to understand their message; but a group of far-seeing and able labor leaders, most of them drawn from the despised intellectuals, made a shrewd guess that the public would receive with acclamation the announcement of a wholly new political programme. The prospect was discussed and reviewed time and again by this group; the ground was explored; and finally a programme was launched under the title of "Labor and the New Social Order."

This appeal formed the most remarkable political document that has seen the light of day in England for many years. Without describing any branch of policy in great detail, it drew the outlines of an ambitious and generous programme with a free hand; and contrived to give the expectant public the impression that labor had not only the will, but the power and the brain, to carry it to fruition. Thus, at a moment when discredit had fallen upon the older parties, when the party chiefs of former times were being judged solely as national leaders in a time of stress, the voice of Labor sounded a new note appropriate to the state of the public mind. By the middle of 1918 the prospect of an early increase in the political power of the Labor party was held out; and the organizers of the party laid their plans to transform it from what it had hitherto been, namely a trade-union group, into a national party. Throwing open their doors to talent wherever it could be found, they declared that any worker of hand or brain—from whatever class he might come—would be a welcome member of the party, provided he subscribed to the general principles of its programme. These principles were not explicitly socialistic, though their expression in "Labor and the New Social Order" was to be read as the first step towards a socialistic state coloured by the prevailing British love of compromise. Hence the programme was couched in terms which made it acceptable to large numbers of Liberals whose entry into the ranks of the Labor party brought to it a much needed accession of strength.

With all these omens in its favor the Labor party nevertheless has failed. It can indeed claim that its growth has been not unsatisfactory, but compared with the hopes entertained two years ago its present position must be severely disappointing to its leaders. Success has deserted it

for several reasons. In the first place, the programme of labor and the new social order has not yet enlisted the enthusiastic support and the devoted propaganda service of the rank and file of the party. It is regarded with suspicion by many of them because of its intellectual origin; and this dislike of the intellectual group to whom the Labor party owes so much is carried by the trade unions to the extent of excluding many of its best men from opportunities to serve in Parliament or to give effective aid in the development of labor as a political force. Not only so: but when the New Social Order was presented to the British public in terms of nationalization, it suffered seriously in popular esteem owing to the not altogether justifiable disrepute into which national management had fallen during the war. A third important factor in the political failure of labor has been the feeling in many parts of the country that organized labor had done very well out of the war, was becoming a little too arrogant, and needed reproof. The fourth factor is the incompetence of the parliamentary Labor party, which though 60 strong in the House of Commons has literally done nothing during the last two years. The combined effect of these factors has been to give labor a serious setback, and so the party has reaped little or no profit from the favorable circumstances of last year.

The Liberal party has done little better. It has not recovered from the disaster of 1918; and while Mr. Asquith's return to the House of Commons as a result of the by-election in Paisley last February was hailed as the opening of a new era of effective political campaigning by the party, in sober truth, his presence in Parliament during the last six months has made very little difference. It is disappointing for Liberals to confess that they are unable to break the vicious circle in which they move. Mr. Asquith's leadership is not inspiring, because he has no one to lead. There are, however, signs that Liberalism is still a great power in the country. Many of Mr. Lloyd George's recent actions show that his acute political sense has told him that the country wants a Liberal rather than a Tory policy. Such a state of the public mind ought to be a welcome opportunity to an Independent Liberal leader in Mr. Asquith's position; but Mr. Asquith himself, in common with some other prominent Liberals, seems least of all men to have caught the meaning of those voices in the air of which I spoke, and

therefore in his public speeches too often fails to strike a note in tune with the public mind. The note of controversy in his speeches belongs more to 1914 than to 1920; and the general public have little patience with people who want to explain or justify things that everyone else has forgotten. In the House of Commons the Liberal Opposition is only some 30 strong. In common with the Labor party it profited by the rapid revulsion of feeling during 1919; but when the public saw that neither Liberalism nor Labor could offer an immediate or effective alternative to Mr. Lloyd George's Coalition they revised their second thoughts, and the course of the last dozen by-elections since the beginning of the present year substantially indicates that, while Labor is growing and Liberalism still a force, the Coalition has a firmer hold on public opinion than it had a year ago.

The truth probably is not that the Coalition is any more popular than it was in 1919 but that everyone recognizes in Mr. Lloyd George the only truly dynamic public figure; and that till a rival of approximately equal magnitude arises to challenge him in the House or in the country his power will remain.

In the circumstances in which the war has left us, with party affiliations broken up, and with a prevailing feeling that many of the ills to which we are heir are beyond the immediate power of man to cure, it is natural that so skilled a political performer as the Prime Minister should have the stage all to himself. Behind this popular attitude towards Mr. Lloyd George there is a daily growing flame of dissatisfaction. A review of the present situation and commitments of the British Government does not conduce to the peace of mind of sober citizens. We have undertaken too much; we are spending too much. In these two sweeping statements is to be found the gravamen of the charge against the present Government. The charge is serious enough in all conscience; and what is required is a vigilant and self-respecting House of Commons to bring it home to the Ministry. But there are also reasons for satisfaction. Not, perhaps, with the Government, but with the general improvement in our position. Whether we have reached the summit of high prices or not, the economic situation in Great Britain is fairly satisfactory. The development of our productive power after the war has proceeded more rapidly than the pessimists believed; and though the Government

has made a terrible mess of the housing problem the industrial situation has on the whole been excellent. The substantial recovery of the sterling exchange on New York in the last six months is but one index of our general improvement. The outlook for the next six months is not quite so good, however; a certain contraction in trade is already visible though this may only be due to the prospective uncertainty of movements in prices.

With such reasons for general satisfaction it is not altogether surprising that the Government should be in a fairly strong position. No doubt its main strength lies in the absence of an alternative. No doubt, too, it would be a better government if it were more homogeneous. But meanwhile it holds the field, and seems likely to live for at least two years more.

The personalities who play the principal part in the parliamentary life of the Coalition, apart from Mr. Lloyd George, are not numerous. Mr. Bonar Law, who is leader of the House of Commons, won a well-deserved reputation for skill and candour during the war, but the present House seems to prefer the manner of Mr. Churchill. Mr. Churchill has had many parliamentary opportunities in the last two sessions, and has made the most of them. In army affairs, and in his attitude towards Russia, he represents a large body of Coalition opinion, which, however, is not widely shared in the country outside. He has usually been regarded as the stormy petrel of politics, whose appearance on the scene was the signal for a lively time; but on more than one occasion—notably during the Amritsar debate in July—he played the unwonted art of conciliator, managing the House with unusual skill. From the immediate parliamentary point of view therefore his star is in the ascendant, but he has little following in the country. Of the other Liberal ministers in the Coalition both Mr. Edwin Montagu and Mr. Herbert Fisher are distinguished men who have done much to uphold the progressive idea in politics during a difficult time. Mr. Fisher's Education Act of 1918 gave him well deserved prestige, and though he has not succeeded quite so well during the present session he is one of the principal assets of the Coalition Government. In Indian affairs Mr. Montagu has contrived to secure the united support of the Cabinet for a genuinely liberal policy, in opposition to

many reactionary elements in the House. Mr. Austen Chamberlain, Chancellor of the Exchequer, has had to face violent opposition from business interests, and has also aroused serious doubts of his firmness as guardian of the public purse in the matter of expenditure. Of the new ministers, Sir Robert Horne, a skilful Scottish barrister who won his administrative spurs during the war, is not only the most successful in Parliament but has secured in an unusual degree the confidence of Mr. Lloyd George. He must be regarded as a personality to be reckoned with; and, though he was an ordinary party man before the war, he has shown a greater adaptability to new circumstances than many of his more experienced colleagues. In the event of a reconstruction of the Government Sir Robert Horne would probably be assigned to one of the more important ministries.

The possibility of such a reconstruction is ever present. A few months ago the opportunity for it seemed to be at hand when Mr. Lloyd George put forward among his Liberal colleagues the idea of a fusion between them and the more progressive Conservatives, in order to form a permanent new party which would stand in the left-centre of politics. The attitude of the Liberal Coalitionists at that time, however, did not encourage Mr. Lloyd George to proceed further with his project. The Liberal ministers felt that in such a fusion their Liberalism would be submerged in what is sometimes called Tory Democracy, and therefore they refused to accept the idea. Then came the National Convention of the Independent Liberals at Leamington. Mr. Lloyd George's Liberal friends attended the meeting on the assumption that the Liberal party, judged as a national organization, was wide enough to contain both themselves and Mr. Asquith's friends. But the latter controlled the Convention, and after a stormy discussion a resolution was passed which practically excommunicated from the Liberal party all those who were members or supporters of the Coalition Government. The feud between the two wings of the Liberal party was thus embittered, and the Coalition Liberals returned to London feeling that perhaps after all they might have to accept fusion with the progressive Tories. A few weeks later, however, a similar convention of the Conservative party displayed some distrust of Lloyd George, being clearly influenced by the fact that the Conservatives, having a majority in the House of Commons, ap-

peared to be in control of the situation. In a certain measure this is true; but Conservative members of Parliament know very well that, even if they are in a majority, this is a Lloyd George Parliament, owing its very existence to the prestige of the Prime Minister, and that if they were to carry hostility to him beyond a certain point he could threaten a dissolution of Parliament with very awkward results for them. Now at the moment of writing no one desires a dissolution, and therefore the issue will not be forced to the breaking point; but beneath the surface it is clear that forces are at work which would make fusion a very delicate task. Probably Mr. Lloyd George's first step will be to reconstruct his Cabinet in such a way as to strengthen its progressive character by eliminating not only one or two of its personal failures but also some of its more reactionary members. A Cabinet of a distinctly progressive character would be more generally representative of public feeling—an influence to which Mr. Lloyd George rarely fails to respond.

To sum up the situation of the present Government and the present Parliament at the end of two years of its life, we must acknowledge that the position has been consolidated. The violent electoral disturbances of last year have not been repeated on the same scale in 1920; and though the Liberal and Labor parties in opposition are still gaining ground at the expense of the Government, their advance is not nearly rapid enough to give the Ministry cause for alarm. As I have pointed out before, the country has had time to review the complex and difficult economic situation created by the war, and has clearly come to the conclusion that no mere change of Government could alter the situation immediately. And since in any case the Opposition parties offer no satisfactory alternative, the Government profits by the operation of the old maxim that possession is nine points of the law. They are in possession; and for the moment no one is either able or willing to dislodge them. Hence they are in a better frame of mind regarding themselves and their future than they were a year ago. Today we do not hear the voice of Lord Birkenhead, the Lord Chancellor, (formerly F. E. Smith) saying of his own Government that it is rotten to the core. But we do hear now, and we shall hear more in the immediate future, of measures to improve its quality. Mr. Lloyd George is probably well aware that next winter will present

him with a situation of considerable difficulty. The aftermath of the war in the form of military enterprises of various kinds, especially in the now disrupted Turkish empire, has imposed a strain on British Government finance which will probably upset all calculations of revenue and expenditure for the current year. And if new complications were to arise in Ireland, in India, in the Near East, or in the labor world they might easily precipitate a political crisis of the first magnitude. The animated debate of July 8 on General Dyer and the Amritsar riots shows that a large and lively section of the Coalition takes a very different view of Imperial responsibilities from that which common sense compels the Government to adopt. The continual revolt of the same section against the Excess Profits Duty and other taxes serves to accentuate that cleavage.

Thus it will be seen that with many urgent problems pressing upon him Mr. Lloyd George finds his chief parliamentary difficulties within the ranks of his own nominal supporters. The revolt of the reactionaries led by Sir Edward Carson on the Amritsar controversy attained serious dimensions, and would have endangered the life of the Government but for the public spirited support which Mr. Asquith gave them on the merits of that issue. If this incident were to be repeated it might have far-reaching consequences, not only upon the Government but upon the course of British politics in our time. Meantime we may say that after a very wayward career—equally marked by error and wisdom—Mr. Lloyd George seems to be more securely set upon a progressive course. I have little doubt that he will follow it with even greater vigour when his present preoccupation with European politics is relaxed and he can turn his mind to domestic problems. He judges policy, persons, and events, not in the light of any coherent body of political doctrine but by instinct: and when he looks out upon the course which will lead him to the next general election, probably some time in 1922, he is pretty certain to see that the public will demands a return to Liberalism. He of all men is not likely to mistake that demand for a call to revive dead controversies; nor is he perhaps the right leader to give the Liberal thought of Great Britain that elevated expression natural to it; but in whatever form he casts it, his policy will probably grow more and more liberal as time goes on.

A. F. WHYTE.